



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on September 25, 2014

## Don't Look Now, But 1,600 (x2) U.S. "Boots on the Ground" in Iraq

Americans have repeatedly been reassured that the counterterrorism offensive (or whatever it is that's not a war) against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or, if you prefer, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), will not be an American ground war. In the jargon of war planners, there will be no American "boots on the ground."



But it has been acknowledged at both the White House and the Pentagon that there are already some 1,600 military service members on the ground in Iraq and we might reasonably assume they did not arrive barefoot. Perhaps their boots were made in China.

Of course several hundred members of America's armed forces personnel are needed to guard one of the grand prizes of the Iraq War of 2003-2011: the U.S. embassy. In addition to underwriting a war costing a trillion or two U.S. dollars (and counting) and the lives of more than 4,000 of our countrymen, the American people also have the privilege of paying for the construction and maintenance of the world's largest embassy in Baghdad, built for a mere \$700 million, or nearly five times the cost of building the Superdome in New Orleans, which was more than eight times the price of the Louisiana Purchase. Such is the price of "progress."

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The rest are engaged in arming, training, and advising the troops of Iraq, which apparently has a 250,000-man army in which no one knows anything about fighting, despite the fact that American troops have been advising and training Iraq security forces since 2003. Other Americans on the ground are directing and coordinating air strikes by U.S. pilots and those of our coalition partners to make sure only the right targets are struck. Americans, after all, have vast experience in bombing campaigns, going back beyond the turn of the century and including the aerial campaign against the Serbs in Bosnia, during which we managed to bomb the Chinese embassy by mistake. As military scholars are inclined to say, "Stuff happens."

"One of the things we've learned over this last decade is, America can make a decisive difference," President Obama assured the troops at MacDill Air Force Base in Florida on September 17, as he repeated and reemphasized the pledge he made in an address to the nation a week earlier. "I want to be clear: The American forces that have been deployed to Iraq do not and will not have a combat mission. They will support Iraqi forces on the ground as they fight for their own country against these terrorists."

The president's words may be clear, but what has been happening "on the ground" in Iraq sort of



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muddies the picture a bit. Two full weeks before that speech at MacDill, *The Daily Beast*, *Newsweek's* online publication, published [an eyewitness account of troop movements](#) during the previous day's battle in Zumar in northern Iraq. The reporter noted "multiple armored Toyotas sweeping down the mountain" and passing within a few feet of the reporter's position.

"The Toyotas were packed with what appeared to be bearded Western Special Operations Forces. I watched the trucks pass and saw for myself the crews inside them. They didn't wear any identifying insignia but they were visibly Western and appeared to match all the visual characteristics of American special operations soldiers." A follow-up inquiry confirmed that American soldiers, boots and all, were indeed on the ground in Iraq and engaged rather closely in combat operations. "Ranking members of the Kurdish military and intelligence service said that one team of U.S. Special Operations was on the ground in Zumar along with several German counterparts, working in conjunction with [Kurdish] Peshmerga units," the dispatch said. *The Daily Beast's* call to the Pentagon produced a terse, contradictory response.

"There are no U.S. troops on the ground in or around Zumar," said a Department of Defense spokesman. Strictly speaking, U.S. Special Forces are not "combat units," but they would appear to be covered by the blanket term "U.S. troops." Was the Pentagon spokesman lying? Or merely protecting truth as a scarce resource in Washington, D.C.?

In an article posted on [Politico.com](#) on Tuesday, Iraq War veteran Clay Hanna reminded readers that truth as it relates to war-making has been a scarce commodity in our nation's capital for quite some time. "It's just not true," he wrote of the pledge to keep American ground forces out of our latest war:

The only question is whether the American people will not be deceived for the umpteenth time as to what we are really doing. Like John F. Kennedy's "advisers" in Vietnam, like the U.S. military secretly training Manuel Noriega (only to arrest him on drug charges later on), or the Reagan administration giving weapons to Saddam Hussein to fight the Iranians, or the CIA funding mujahedeen in the 1980s who were later to become al Qaeda, or the Bush administration using the threat of weapons of mass destruction as a pretext for invasion, this strategy to send in "advisers" to fight the Islamic State is subterfuge, and reflects conflicted leadership. ... If you could destroy a terrorist organization from the air alone, Israel would have long ago annihilated Hamas. The last thing we want is another Mogadishu — think *Blackhawk Down* — and you can bet that the Islamic State's main objective in Syria will be to embarrass us when we overreach and shame us when we miss and kill kids.

Children are, of course, among the most defenseless victims of war, but "collateral damage," especially in war by weapons loosed at distances high above the battle or from remote aircraft carriers, includes the lives of innocent adults as well. The *New York Times*, in a May 29, 2012 report on the supposedly careful selection of targets of U.S. bombing in Pakistan, Yemen, and elsewhere, noted, "Mr. Obama embraced a disputed method for counting civilian casualties that did little to box him in. It in effect counts all military-age males in a strike zone as combatants, according to several administration officials, unless there is explicit intelligence posthumously proving them innocent."

The benefits of being proven innocent "posthumously" are not available to the slain Yemenis or Pakistanis, since they are still ineligible to vote in Afghanistan, Iraq, or Illinois. But sometimes a Pentagon spokesman will express regret over the killing of innocents. Sometimes.

Hypocrisy and double standards are hardly new to the ancient art of diplomacy, but Hanna nonetheless



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raised a valid point when he asked: “How can we stand up and call out Vladimir Putin for his deception in the Ukraine — for covertly using Russian soldiers and pretending they’re Ukrainian “separatists” — and at the same time say with a straight face that our ‘advisers’ will not have a combat mission?”

Military officials, both past and present, have indicated they are far less certain than the president appears to be that the war against the so-called Islamic State can be won without U.S. combat units. Former Defense Secretary Robert Gates told CBS News, “The reality is, they’re not going to be able to be successful against ISIS strictly from the air, or strictly depending on the Iraqi forces, or the Peshmerga, or the Sunni tribes acting on their own. ... So there will be boots on the ground if there’s to be any hope of success in the strategy.”

Army Chief of Staff Ray Odierno called the 1,600 U.S. troops in Iraq “a good start.” On the same day President Obama was at MacDill, repeating his pledge of no American ground troops, Gen. Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was [telling the Senate Foreign Relations Committee](#).

My view at this point is that this coalition is the appropriate way forward. I believe that will prove true. But if it fails to be true, and if there are threats to the United States, then I, of course, would go back to the president and make a recommendation that may include the use of U.S. military ground forces.

Recalling his own combat experience in Iraq, Hanna wrote in his Politico article:

We are most successful when we go to [the enemy’s] neighborhood and target him while he is complacent and rests assured that he can’t be found and that we don’t have the guts or the determination to bring the war to him. This cannot be done remotely or from the air alone.

Considering the outcome of that previous war in Iraq, as well as the way the Vietnam War ended, perhaps it would be advisable not to try to be so “successful” this time.



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